

Popular Culture and Diversity: Using *Star Trek* in Multicultural Teacher Education

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Introduction

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching multicultural education courses is getting students to remove themselves from their everyday lives and

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experiences to consider alternative lives and experiences. Provocative and controversial issues dealing with race, gender, and class often cause defensive reactions in students. Students become caught up in their own viewpoints and feelings to the point that it becomes difficult to relate to the issues in a manner that allows for analytic exploration and discussion. While it is critically important that students become emotionally and actively involved in the course content, it is also crucial that students begin to move beyond their everyday experiences to consider other ways of thinking and being. To some extent it is important that students examine issues of race, class, and gender in a detached manner. In this paper we intend to describe how we have been able to move students beyond their everyday lives through the use of the popular culture phenomenon of *Star Trek*.

The Vision

Star Trek was created by Gene Roddenberry, a self-described humanist who had a specific notion about the vision of the future. His philosophy held that humans would control their destiny and thus the future. Further, Roddenberry believed that in the future, racism, prejudice, and discrimination would no longer be issues on our planet. Roddenberry's vision is realized in *Star Trek* where the American ideal of egalitarianism is combined with a pursuit of science to produce a progressive setting where people from all human groups and universal species come together to expand knowledge. *Star Trek* promotes a positive view of the future of humanity as opposed to the apocalyptic view seen in other representations such as the Mad Max movies or *Blade Runner*.

Indeed, the bridge crew of the original *Star Trek*¹ is a virtual mosaic of the United States. The members include: Captain James T. Kirk, an all-American boy from Iowa; Science Officer Spock, a Vulcan, whose people emphasize logic and control of emotion; the navigator Mr. Chekov, a Russian; helm officer Mr. Sulu, an individual of Japanese descent born on the Mars colony; communications officer Lt. Uhura, an African American female; and Dr. McCoy, a southern gentlemen country doctor. For the first time on network television we were treated to a multicultural montage of persons in positions of respect, intelligence, and responsibility. While each of these individuals reflected aspects of their cultural backgrounds, none played a racial/ethnic stereotype.

The subsequent *Star Trek* series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and *Star Trek: Voyager* are just as, if not more, multicultural in their characters and story lines. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation* women

play a more prominent role than they did in the original *Star Trek*. Both the ship's counselor and chief medical officer are females. In addition, numerous episodes feature women as admirals, engineers, scientists, villains, and planetary leaders.

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine chronicles the lives of space station personnel in a recently demilitarized zone. A bloody ethnic conflict between two species has recently ended, and the Federation has placed Star Fleet personnel in charge of the deep space station. The station commander is an African American male. His two closest advisors, a scientist and a former resistance officer, are strong female characters. The newest *Star Trek* series, *Star Trek: Voyager*, has at its helm a female captain. The multiethnic crew members include a Native American, an Asian American, and a Latina Klingon². The show also includes a number of strong female roles. The feature films carry on the tradition of diversity and exploration as well.

Roddenberry's belief in the strength of pluralism can also be seen in a number of guiding principles of the *Star Trek* universe where planets across the galaxy have come together to form an organization called the United Federation of Planets. Dedicated to peaceful exploration, the Federation unites multiple species and beings in a common effort. The most important principle of the Federation is the Prime Directive. The Prime Directive is the canon of the Federation and explicitly forbids interference in the normal development of another culture. Furthermore, the Vulcan philosophy of IDIC (Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination) has been of great influence on the pulse of the series.

Beyond *Star Trek*'s embodiment of many ideals held to be important to multicultural education, it is also immensely popular with students and the general public. *Star Trek* conventions occur regularly all over the United States, fan clubs abound (one can be a member of Star Fleet or a crew member on a Klingon Bird of Prey ship), and there are numerous internet discussion groups. Indeed, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* entered its seventh season with its highest ratings, often the top-rated show among males 18-49 years of age as well as with other viewers.

The *Star Trek* phenomenon is so widespread that a body of research literature exploring the phenomenon exists. This literature ranges from dissertations exploring modern mythology (Olivier, 1987) to identity construction (Helford, 1992). Articles can be found in communication journals (Winegarden, Fuss-Reineck, & Charron, 1993), religion journals (Jindra, 1994), and language arts journals (D'Ignazio, 1991). This body of research explores the popularity of *Star Trek* as a cultural phenomenon as well as its application as a teaching tool. We intend to extend the literature by describing ways in which to use specific episodes of *Star Trek*, the original series, and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

to illustrate concepts such as racism, intolerance, world view, cross cultural communication, and assimilation, among others.

Classroom Application of *Star Trek* Classic (ST) and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (STNG)

The courses in which we have used *Star Trek* episodes as teaching tools include graduate and undergraduate courses at the University of Houston - Clear Lake (UHCL). The courses fall under the rubric of multicultural education even though each course is unique. At UHCL undergraduate students seeking admission to the teacher education program and graduate students seeking initial teacher certification or a MS degree in one of the School of Education specialty areas are required to take at least one course in multicultural education. Further, a Master's degree in multicultural studies is offered. The undergraduate multicultural education course is geared to exposing students to theories and ideas about diversity in the United States and the ways in which issues of diversity affect education. The graduate multicultural education course focuses on diversity issues but more directly addresses classroom structures and learning opportunities that influence educational equity. The graduate course also covers models of multicultural education, parental involvement, and ethics. We have found that students in both classes respond positively to the illustration of concepts through use of episodes of *Star Trek*.

The following is a list of the episodes of *Star Trek* that we have used or that can be used in a multicultural education course. Included is a synopsis of the plot and the concept or concepts which are illustrated by each episode.

The Devil in the Dark (ST): In this episode, an unknown creature is killing miners. Mr. Spock discovers that the creature is killing only to protect its eggs that are being destroyed during the mining process. This episode is an excellent one to use as an introduction to a multicultural education course. The concept of xenophobia is clearly illustrated. Students can discuss how actions are interpreted from one's own knowledge base and experiences. They can explore how easy it is to misinterpret and fear what is unknown. As a final activity, students can brainstorm examples of xenophobia or misinterpretations from their own lives thus personalizing the concepts illustrated in this episode.

Darmok (STNG): This episode appears in fans' listings of favorite episodes. Picard, the captain of the Enterprise, meets Dathon, a Tamarian whose language is indecipherable. Placed together on a planet where they encounter a predatory creature, Picard and Dathon first fear one another but ultimately learn to

communicate. This episode allows students to examine the emotional responses inherent in a cross-cultural situation. Students can examine the assumptions made by various characters and discuss possible reasons for these assumptions. This episode shows that a common cause can draw individuals together. As a culminating activity students can brainstorm a list of common causes or experiences which might bring people together or push them apart.

The Chase (STNG): In this episode ship crews from several different species seek the answer to a genetic/biological puzzle. The answer to the puzzle is locked in the basic building blocks of life and involves the crews in a chase across the galaxy to numerous planets and star systems. This is a good episode to use to bring into question our notions of race. It also illustrates the prejudices different species have about each other. Students can apply these ideas to the racial and ethnic prejudices that exist in our society today.

The Outcast (STNG): The members of the androgynous species in this episode reject any overt or covert notion of female or male sexuality. People who believe they have a gender are considered outcasts who need to be reeducated to accept their gender neutrality. This episode can be used on multiple levels. One level is the issue of sexuality and how we identify ourselves and those we love. It can serve as a starting point for a discussion about homosexuality. It can also be used to illustrate the lengths to which a society will go in order to ensure a homogeneous society. This can lead to a discussion about the parameters for identification as a member of a nation state, i.e., what it means to be American.

The Best of Both Worlds Parts 1 & 2 (STNG): The Federation battles the Borg, a species of technologically enhanced biological beings who seek to assimilate other species into their own. The process of assimilation leads to the annihilation of the other species. Assimilation in this case is taken to its extreme. This episode provides an excellent lead to a discussion of definitions of assimilation and acculturation and theories of the process of each.

I, Borg (STNG): The Enterprise encounters an injured adolescent Borg and brings him aboard ship to save his life. This episode illustrates how we must confront our stereotypes and prejudices when faced with the personal experience of the individual. The young Borg is the catalyst for various crew members to see beyond the group to the individual. This follows Allport's (1979) theory of social contact. The crew of the Enterprise considers using the individual Borg as a means to destroy the whole race of Borks. This highly charged moral dilemma poses the question of who has ultimate rights to existence in the universe.

The Measure of a Man (STNG) - Data, the android crew member, is ordered to report to Starbase for disassembly. In this episode we can consider who is a full

member of a society with all the rights and privileges due an individual. This issue is particularly important in today's atmosphere of anti-immigration hysteria and welfare reform.

Offspring (STNG): Data creates an android offspring. The upper echelon of Starfleet voice concerns about the best environment for raising the offspring. Again this episode deals with the rights accorded an individual in a society and whether those rights can be put aside for certain concerns. The issues raised in this episode are timely given recent discussions about rearing children by gay couples, or in two-parent households, or in orphanages.

Gender and Sex Roles in *Star Trek*

In addition to using specific episodes, *Star Trek* as a whole vision can be used as a catalyst for other discussions as well. One such discussion might center around gender and sex roles and how the depiction of these roles has changed over time. A comparison of the female characters in the various *Star Trek* programs will illustrate the change and expansion in sex roles. In the original series the female characters seen on a regular basis consisted of a nurse, a communications officer, and a yeoman. These roles were played very traditionally; the women's job was to support the males for whom they worked. For example, Lt. Uhura, despite being an equally qualified and trained bridge officer, was often depicted as being fearful (ST episode *Mirror, Mirror*) or looking for guidance (ST episode *City on the Edge of Forever*).

This portrayal can be compared with the role of Captain Elizabeth Janeway in the new series *Star Trek: Voyager*. Although females have been captains in episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the introduction of a female captain as a main character in *Star Trek: Voyager* is a first. The decision to cast the captain as a female character engendered heated discussions on the *Star Trek* bulletin boards on the Internet as well as in *Star Trek* fan magazines (called fanzines). Students can consider the character of Captain Janeway and explore why the notion of a female captain is controversial. Another discussion could focus on how popular culture reflects our notions of sex roles. A follow up activity could consist of students examining several television programs for sex-role stereotyping.

Conclusion

We are not among the first to suggest ways in which to use popular culture in multicultural education courses. Banks (1993), Bennett (1995), and Singer (1994) advocate the use of films, literature, or both. We add to this knowledge base by outlining ways in which a popular television series can be used in a meaningful way for classroom instruction. By no means have we exhausted the possible applications of the *Star Trek* phenomenon. As individual instructors delve into the *Star Trek* world they will find their own meaning to the episodes as well as possible uses.

We would also like to add a word of caution in regard to using the shows. All of the original *Star Trek* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episodes are available on videotape for purchase or rental. A limited number of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* episodes are available on videotape; none of the *Star Trek: Voyager* episodes are available. The episodes may be videotaped from the television. We urge individuals who chose this route to observe all copyright laws and if a tape is kept for continued classroom use to obtain copyright permission from the appropriate entities.

While we have had success in using *Star Trek* episodes in classes, we have also faced a few problems. Inevitably, the first time we show a *Star Trek* episode some students question the appropriateness of using a television program to illustrate sociological, psychological, and educational concepts. Those who have not watched *Star Trek* before expect to see guns, strange monsters, and fantastical creatures.

Though set several hundred years in the future, *Star Trek* retains a familiarity to our society today. This enables students to both distance themselves yet personalize the concepts discussed in class. In evaluations at the end of the semester students consistently rank the *Star Trek* episodes highly for helping them understand concepts discussed in class.

In general we attribute the success we have had to the unique application of this piece of popular culture. Using such an obviously created setting as that portrayed in *Star Trek* allows students to consider issues of assimilation, communication, pluralism, and gender in a forum that is nonthreatening. This forum emphasizes these issues as ideas that are created and take on meaning from the interactions individuals have about them. Thus it becomes a safe topic for discussion. It moves the discussion from a "me" orientation to a "we" orientation. And the development of a "we" dialogue is sought as one of the primary outcomes of a multicultural education experience.

Endnotes

¹ A number of television programs are affiliated with the name Star Trek. The original *Star Trek*, or Classic Trek, was produced and aired from 1966 to 1969. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (STNG) was produced and aired for seven seasons from 1987-1994. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (DS9) began in 1993 and is in its fourth season. *Star Trek: Voyager* is the latest addition to the genre and began airing episodes in January 1995. For a more detailed description of each show see Asherman (1993), Nemeck (1992), and Okuda and Okuda (1990). In addition, seven feature films have been made, and an eighth is in the planning stages. Further, an animated *Star Trek* series aired from October of 1974 to September of 1975.

² Klingons are a warrior culture who joined the Federation after years of overt and covert hostilities. The character in *Voyager*, B'Elanna Torres, has given indications that future conflict about her identity may arise. This theme should be monitored for future classroom applications about biethnic identity formation.

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